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The Creative Industries and Degree Apprenticeships: The benefits and challenges of adoption for small and micro businesses

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The Creative Industries and Degree Apprenticeships: The benefits and challenges of adoption for small and micro businesses

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Revision for *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning*

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to identify the needs and receptiveness of the creative industry sectors, in particular small and micro businesses, in respect of the adoption and development of degree apprenticeships. In addition, the paper aims to identify employers’ barriers to entry into such programmes.

Design/methodology/approach – Due to the lack of knowledge of degree apprenticeships, an ‘explain and respond’ method was adopted, where a comprehensive explanation of degree apprenticeships and the process for delivery was given to respondents. This enabled them to ask questions and give informed and knowledgeable response to interview questions.

Findings – Participants in this research were generally positive about the integration and adoption of degree apprenticeships into their businesses. However, they suggest that the rigid procedure set by the Institute for Apprenticeships makes embarking on the process of developing standards and adopting degree apprenticeships difficult, time-consuming and impracticable for businesses of their size and in these sectors. This has implications for addressing skills shortages and diversity that stands to endanger the continued success of the creative industries.

Originality/value – Little research has been conducted into the viability of degree apprenticeships for creative industries, particularly non-levy paying small and micro businesses.

Keywords: degree apprenticeships, creative industries

Paper type: empirical research

Introduction

Degree apprenticeships (DAs) were first introduced by the UK Government in 2015 and are considered an alternative to traditional university degrees. One of the key differences is that DAs are first and foremost a job with an employer where the training apprentices undertake in the workplace

forms part of the assessment for a degree. However, one of the major challenges in introducing DAs is the lack of awareness among school pupils, parents and employers (HEFCE, 2018; Universities UK, 2019) and the need for better information, advice and guidance on development and implementation.

Since 2008, a range of media and creative apprenticeships frameworks for industry have been available and supported by Creative & Cultural Skills (CCSkills) (2020) and Creative Skillset (now Screenskills) (2019). They have been available in the form of Creative Apprenticeships (CAs). Through National Skills Academy network of industry and education supporters, CCSkills have created over 7,000 CAs. CAs have similarities to DAs but are FE vocational qualifications at level 2 or 3 and a theory-based qualification at level 2 or 3.

In 2015, the Conservative government pledged to substantially increase the number of apprenticeships in the UK through funding initiatives. These initiatives include those higher and degree apprenticeships where employers develop partnerships with further and higher education institutions and learning providers.

In the spending review and 2015 Autumn statement the UK Government announced the introduction of an employer levy to raise £3 billion by 2019-2020 (HM Treasury, 2015:15) with the express purpose of helping to fund apprenticeships. The apprenticeship levy, effective from 6 April 2017, pertains to employers with a pay bill over £3 million each year (Department for Education, 2017). Employers below this figure are exempt from the levy and will be able to access up to 95% towards the cost of apprenticeship training from the fund (Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2019). In 2019, levy paying employers paid £2.8bn (HM Revenue and Customs, 2019:179) into the levy fund but spent just £864m, leaving just less than £2bn underspent (Marsh R., 2019).

Currently, employers can either develop their own bespoke apprenticeship standards through an Institute for Apprenticeships-approved Trailblazer group, or use a pre-existing approved standard. Development of a new apprenticeship standard, enabled through a Trailblazer group, describes required levels of knowledge, skills and behaviours for the apprentices to attain during the apprenticeship period. A Trailblazer group must comprise at least ten employers interested in developing the standard (Institute for Apprenticeships, 2017:3) However, while DA programmes have been successfully adopted in several industries, few are currently active within creative sectors, particularly digital. Many of these procedural demands make embarking on the process of developing standards difficult, time-consuming and impracticable for small and micro businesses. Additionally, many claim the lack of support in developing apprenticeship standards is a hindrance to developing apprenticeship standards (Riley, 2017).

At the time of writing, the Institute for Apprenticeships, the government body tasked with overseeing the DA process, has approved few degree apprenticeship standards that are directly applicable for creative industries companies (Institute for Apprenticeships, 2018).

Creative industries

The UK creative industries constitute an important and successful sector for the UK economy. Growing twice as fast as the rest of the economy, the creative industries are the fastest growing sector in the UK (DCMS, 2017). In addition, more than eight out of ten creative jobs in the UK are expected to be resistant to future automation (Bakhshi H. et al., 2015). Nevertheless, UK creative industries currently face a number of recruitment issues. These sectors are expected to need 1 million new workers by 2030 and there are concerns about the ability of the education system to supply the quantity and quality of workers needed to facilitate the growth of the creative economy (IAB UK and Middlesex University, 2020; Bakhshi H. and Windsor G., 2015; Dass M. et al., 2015).

Recent figures suggest an overall 35% decline in creative arts subjects at GCSE since 2010, with film and TV studies down 22% and performing arts down 26% (Culture Learning Alliance, 2018). The Augur Review (2019) recommendations for post-18 education acknowledges the importance of quality education for the creative industries and identifies a clear need to address and reduce skill shortages within the sector. However, employers report a lack of skills and experience when recruiting creative graduates and there are concerns about the lack of diversity (Smith, 2018). Added to this is the potential for a creative industries workforce crisis as a result of the UK leaving the European Union (House of Commons: DCMS Committee, 2018; Redmond, 2019).

Recent research (Riley, 2017) shows that creative industry organisations and media companies compete in a very fluid and constantly changing market with the need for sustainable recruitment and for a constant stream of young employees onto the job market. Small and micro companies dominate the creative industries. DCMS Economic Estimates report (2017) found that 94.7% of businesses employ fewer than 10 people (p. 17). Government funding and partnership initiatives prove to be profoundly time- and resource-intensive and more directly suited to larger businesses with greater infrastructures (Bazalgette, 2017). As a result, DA programmes have been successfully adopted in several industries, but few are currently active within creative sectors. While measures have been put in place to help introduce DAs into businesses of this size, there are technical administrative issues preventing progress.

Under the current system, small (10 to 49 employees) and micro (fewer than 10 employees) UK creative industries businesses are exempt from paying the apprenticeship levy. Under this system, non-levy paying companies 'co-invest' by sharing the cost of training and assessing apprentices with the government (Department for Education, 2017). This is a positive incentive for micros and small businesses to opt into the programme.

However, currently only learning providers who were awarded Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) contracts can provide non-levy payers with training. Levy-paying employers who choose to employ apprentices create accounts with the digital Apprenticeship Service in order to receive and manage levy funds spent on apprenticeships. Nonetheless, at the time of writing, February 2020, to access apprenticeship funding non-levy payers have to 'reserve funds' by giving education providers

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9 permission to enter this information on their behalf (Education & Skills Funding Agency, 2020:39).
10 No date has been announced when all non-levy paying employers are able to independently access
11 ESFA funding and data services. This disables training providers without ESFA contracts, including
12 universities, to provide apprenticeship training for non-levy paying employers.
13

14 When access to funding becomes more freely available to all non-levy paying employers through the
15 Institute for Apprenticeships, research data will be required to inform programme development and
16 understand the needs of creative industry companies. It is important to ascertain what the advantages
17 and disadvantages of adopting DA for small and micro creative industries are and how delivery of the
18 'co-investment' model of DAs is practical for the sector and higher education institutions.
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22 **Aims and objectives**

23 The research aim in the current project is to identify and ascertain the needs and receptiveness of the
24 creative industries to the adoption and development of DAs, in particular for non-levy paying
25 companies. In addition, the research aims to identify employers' barriers to entry into the programme.
26 This, it is hypothesised, will lend insight into ways of facilitating relationships and learning practices
27 between creative industries and universities through the generation of primary research.
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30 Research, therefore, has been required in order to answer the following question:

31 What are the requirements of the creative industries for delivery of a DA 'co-investment'
32 model that is both beneficial to the sector and is workable and viable for higher education
33 institutions?
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37 **Methodology**

38 The methodology underpinning this empirical study derives from issues directly applicable to the
39 creative industries and, in particular, small and micro businesses. Based on initial research, awareness
40 of DAs within the creative industries was extremely low. This hypothesis was substantiated by
41 participants' responses to the 'prior knowledge' interview question during the research.
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44 In order to elicit the required level of response from participants, it was necessary to explain the model
45 of DAs through the lens of the creative industries and, particularly, the financial and employment
46 benefits to small and micro businesses. Therefore an 'explain and respond' approach was adopted,
47 where a comprehensive explanation of the process was provided prior to the interviews in order for
48 participants to ask questions and then give informed and knowledgeable response during the interview.
49

50 Had the interviews been conducted in respondents' company premises, eliciting knowledgeable
51 responses might have been problematic and time-consuming. The presentation would have to have
52 been delivered individually before each interview to allow the respondent full comprehension of the
53 DA programme.
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While the sample of participants were all primarily sourced from the creative industries, the author is aware and acknowledges the limitations of the relatively small sample, particularly with regards to the wide-ranging disciplines and job roles throughout the diverse sectors of the creative industries.

Research methods

The project uses qualitative research methods to produce primary research gathered from the creative industry sector. Data was collected from a number of potential stakeholders in the project: owners and decision makers of micro and small non-levy paying creative industry companies.

The event enabled a three-stage process to take place in one session and in one location: firstly, an explanation of DAs and government policy and, crucially, the potential opportunities for non-levy paying companies to access funds for apprenticeship; secondly, a discussion process with and between delegates; thirdly, and most importantly, an opportunity to record interviews with attendees that form part of the empirical and qualitative study.

Data was collected using two methods. Firstly, attendees were given the opportunity to take part in a question and answer at the end of each session and, secondly, attendees participated in one-to-one interviews where a set of eight questions was asked.

Event content and itinerary

Question and Answer sessions

Three presentation sessions were delivered during the event with over forty attendees. All sessions began with two presentations. Firstly, a fifteen-minute *Introduction to the Creative Industries* followed by a *Degree Apprenticeships* presentation lasting around half an hour. There was a high level of attendee engagement in the Q&A sessions and the one-to-one interviews, which helped clarify specific areas of the programme and further inform the attendees. The final Q&A session overran due to highly-engaged attendees.

One-to-one interviews

Eleven one-to-one interviews were conducted for this research. Ten were conducted throughout the day of the event. One interview was conducted seven weeks after the event. Each interview lasted from between three and eleven minutes.

Sectors involved

A wide range of non-levy paying creative agencies, production companies and sole traders attended the event. The agencies were concerned with: moving image; animation and branding; TV commercials editors; creative video and film production; video marketing; digital design; motion

graphics and VFX; web design; digital design and direction for broadcast; charity sector; and training providers for 19+ adults.

Event responses/receptiveness

Attendee awareness of degree apprenticeships

There was little awareness of DAs prior to the event; most attendees assumed DAs were based on the traditional model of college 'day-release', or as an alternative to A-Levels and higher education. This was reflected in both the Q&A sessions and in interview responses.

After the DA model was explained, there was an overwhelmingly positive response to the concept of DAs and attendees were surprised at the possibilities for, and flexibility of, the current model. Generally, attendees were positive towards the specificity of job role apprenticeship standards and the flexibility of the mandatory 20% off-the-job training requirement, which can be conducted in the workplace.

Question and answer responses

The Q&A sessions were provided to help clarify areas of interest and questions specific to individual organisations. One question repeatedly asked at all three Q&A sessions concerned recruitment. Small and micro company owners suggested that there was a need for help with finding the right apprentice candidates for their business. This topic was revisited in greater detail in many of the interview responses.

Post-presentation attendees' interview responses

After each session, selected attendees were invited for a short, semi-structured interview about the viability of DAs for their businesses. Interviewees were all asked the same eight questions, which were designed to find out the level of viability of DAs for their business. Questions were devised to prompt discussion around the advantages and barriers for adoption and to elicit whether an apprentice standard/Trailblazer group development model was an option.

Graduate versus non-graduate recruitment

Firstly, it must be noted that a high proportion of respondents stated that they did not consider a university degree essential for working in the creative industries, or that a degree was important for working for their company. The head of development at a small, high-end video editing company stated:

I'm not really that interested whether they have a degree [...] other than in them having a kind of creative playground, almost, to explore their own ideas and their own creativity as artists (A).

Indeed, several interviewees felt that graduates did not have the appropriate training or skills, particularly in the niche areas or specialisations of their companies. Some went further, suggesting that there is a huge mismatch between what universities teach and the relevance for their industry and company.

Often people who are teaching used to work in industry [...] 20 years ago, and so they're not always so up-to-date with the top end progressive science of what's actually happening (A).

This is in line with a British Chamber of Commerce workforce survey of 3,000 companies, that found 88% of businesses believe school leavers are unprepared for the world of work and 54% consider that graduates are unprepared for the workplace. Crucially, with regards to DAs, more than three quarters of companies (76%) believe a lack of work experience is the reason young people are unprepared for work (BCC, 2014). A Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development report (2013) states that there is, "a real mismatch between employers' expectations during the recruitment process and young people's understanding of what is expected of them, particularly when it comes to presentation and preparation" (ibid.:4).

In addition, several interviewees expressed that graduates had too high an expectation of what level they can enter the job market and that their financial remuneration expectation was beyond their skill level and industry experience. Additionally, there was a perception that interns or graduates did not work hard enough to develop knowledge and experience or respond well to being given menial tasks. One interviewee stated for these reasons he does not use graduates:

I've just parked the idea of doing anything with graduates [as it's] just not compatible with the business, not compatible commercially, not compatible creatively (B).

However, crucially, he revealed that finding out about DAs at the event "has popped that bubble".

Viability of Degree Apprenticeships for Creative Industries

Interviewees were asked if DAs were viable for their business right now. Over half (six) of all interviewees thought that DAs had the potential to work in their business. In this regard, the DA model was appealing to industry because of the ability for companies in niche areas of the sector to tailor training to their specific needs through the Trailblazer programme. Consequently, within this context, several interviewees considered the degree component attractive as it could act as an incentive in the recruitment process. That is, potential apprentices could gain a recognised qualification while earning a salary and without student tuition fee debt. One founding partner and creative director at a creative video and animation company said:

I really like the idea of giving people those opportunities, [where they] come out of it with a structured degree and training [...] They've had in-workplace training, which there's no substitute for and I just love the idea that both parties (company and apprentice) get to benefit from that (C).

A director of a B2B business that produces video marketing and social media campaigns for other micro businesses found the DA model appealing. To date she has had a fear and hesitation about employing someone because:

I'm a ['solopreneur'] micro business [owner] and I'm just starting out [...] I don't have the funds to offer good fancy salaries that would get people interested. Whereas this way I can offer something more than just 'can you do it for minimum wage?' (D).

The head creative and owner of a digital design agency and motion graphics company with a workforce of fifteen explained that he thought DAs have,

lots of incentives for the [small] business owner. [Such as] subsidies on employing people; getting people at the beginning; building a relationship with them; learning and growing together. [This] seems a much better model than just trying to 'buy' somebody [in] at the end of a degree show (C).

The 'buy' model relates to graduate recruitment strategies and their chances for success, which was discussed in the DA presentation. It conveys the segmentation of employability and how it translates into successful employment, whereby the 'buy' model has a 1-to-15 chance of success whereas the 'build' model is 1-to-1 and 'buy and build' 1-to-4 (Burke and Gibbs, 2014:12).

A small production agency owner echoed these thoughts adding that it was:

The flexibility [and] the subsidy (access to the government levy fund) [...] that makes [DAs] viable for companies [and] organisations like ours, but that there is the insurance of the quality and the levels (apprenticeship standards) as well, the degree and masters (B).

Several interviewees identified the DA model as a good way to help grow their business, which offers an incentive for young people to join an organisation through formal training, qualification and no student loan repayment. Firstly, a company director of a digital agency working primarily with non-profits stated:

I can see the potential of degree apprenticeships to an organisation like ours. We're quite small, we are effectively four or five members of staff, but one of the things that we are looking at is [...] bringing in younger people who might grow with the business and have particular training needs. So, I can see how the model fits (E).

Secondly, a creative director and owner of a small production agency in the moving image sector with less than twenty employees added that, due to the nature and size of their business, the agency did not currently employ juniors.

We're very small, and we are looking for new ways to grow [the business] all the time. [...] With normal employment there isn't the scope to train people [...]. Everyone we bring in on a project is bespoke, they're masters of their art [...]. What that means is it doesn't leave us much room to have anyone working [...] in other areas to build other parts of the business. [...] Most of our workforce are of a particular age, they're going to be in their late 20's at the very earliest, [...] more likely their 30's upwards. I think what [DAs would give] is an opportunity for us to bring in people of a different generation, young people (B).

One interviewee indicated that universities' graduates were already being overlooked as possible junior employees in some creative industry companies. The head of organisation and development for a high-end video and film editing company in East London explains that, currently, the company will "train people from the ground up, which means them starting as a runner. And if they don't start as a runner, they're going to miss a lot of training that we find they need to have". She explains that this method of using runners could be easily replicated or transferred in the DA model.

I'm quite happy to take young people that don't have degrees [and] develop [them] in the Trailblazer model [for a] degree. [...] We have a really strong training and development ethic and we have a coaching team, and so our runners are being trained as assistant editors, [...] and as soon as they get to a certain level [they] become a Trainee Assistant Editor. Then they train within the Assistant Editor department for a number of years before becoming an editor. So our problem is there is nobody at university who's going to teach [him or her] how to do that. I'm interested in the idea that we could actually develop something new that would allow young people to get a qualification while they are working for us and to utilise the government funding (A).

The niche nature of creative businesses means that often companies are looking to develop bespoke skills that flow with the advancement of the work and technology associated with the job role. The development of the knowledge, skills and behaviours associated with that company and with the development of apprenticeship standards are important too and necessary for working in that field.

Viability of DAs and developing standards for Creative Industries

Interviewees were asked if DAs were viable for their business right now. The main issue expressed by the sample concerned developing a bespoke standard for their business. In order to create new apprenticeship standards for a job role, employers must form a Trailblazer group, which must comprise at least 10 different employers as members (Institute for Apprenticeships, 2017:3), to develop the standard. Apprenticeship Standards are nationally approved requirements for occupational competence for a specific job role. Occupational competence is described in terms of required knowledge, skills and behaviours (KSBs).

Three interviewees expressed disappointment at the lack of currently available and approved apprenticeship job standards on the Institute for Apprenticeships website (2018), particularly within the creative and digital sectors, and this was a disincentive to adopting DAs at this present time. One of the barriers to entry given by several company owners was the development of an apprenticeship standard through the Trailblazer programme. While the Institute for Apprenticeships has introduced a ‘faster and better’ programme (2019), development of standards was seen as problematic due to the seemingly bureaucratic and time-consuming process, particularly for small and micro businesses and the 10-company requirement needed to form a Trailblazer group.

It feels appropriate that a mix of companies of different sizes is available in that process but, for smaller companies, it's always difficult to find time for those kinds of endeavours (E).

While interviewees gave general support and interest for the adoption of DAs, many contended that this would only work if standards were already available ‘off-the-shelf’.

We're a small company; there are 15 of us all together. Employing staff and keeping staff, and finding the right kind of staff, is really important to us. [...] So if there was an apprenticeship [standard] that was [suitable] for our company, I would be very interested (C).

While the main objection was the investment of time needed for the Trailblazer process to produce a new apprenticeship standard, interviewees were willing to ‘feed in’ their knowledge to the process.

When asked whether it was viable for creative businesses to collaborate with other companies to develop apprenticeship standards, there was a mixed response. Small creative businesses are very competitive, which could lead to a potential conflict of interest.

Design agencies tend to be quite competitive and don't really collaborate [...] The only time we ever meet is when we are pitching against each other, so getting everybody together in the first place might be tricky (C).

Additionally, due to the niche areas in which they reside, small creative businesses might encounter difficulty in identifying and persuading a similar company to collaborate on a standard. However, many expressed that, in principle, this was a challenge worth pursuing because the rewards were potentially high and in some areas of the sector people working together was becoming more commonplace.

If we could get ourselves and nine other people together then we could work out what the actual criteria are, what the skills and knowledge and behaviours are, then I think it would be really good (F).

Respondents were then asked to comment on the advantages to their company if they had DAs. As one would expect, access to the apprenticeship levy with up to 95% for training cost was cited as a major advantage. Alongside this was the perception that working with an apprentice over the course of a three-year period would help build a better employer/employee relationship and help with staff

retention. DAs could help to cultivate creative team behaviours suitable for their company and are a good way for young people gain knowledge of their market. Another perceived advantage was the opportunity to offer 'upskill' training to people already employed within a company. These points are seen as preferable long-term solutions and more beneficial to both employer and apprentice as opposed to employing a graduate since they foster more driven and committed applicants.

Apprenticeship recruitment

A significant point raised by interviewees was that DAs have the potential to address difficulties that small and micro businesses face in the recruitment process.

In our sector, we find it hard to find suitable talent. Up until now the recruitment efforts we've made haven't really allowed us to identify people who we necessarily think would be a good fit for the organisation. DAs feel like they might be a way of attracting the right type of people into the company (E).

A recurring theme was the process by which companies of this size encounter difficulties finding the right apprentices/junior staff for their businesses. Four interviewees indicated that they would like universities/training providers to help in the recruitment process and even act as recruitment agencies to help them find suitable talent and even evaluate the applicants.

One explained that the recruitment process for a permanent junior member of staff is different to the process required for an experienced or senior as it involves dealing with an unknown quantity. Indeed, some indicated that there should be a combined recruitment process with the university (or training provider) and support with advertising that job via the university website. This could save them; particularly small and micro company employers, going through several rounds of various interviews.

Several interviewees remarked that receiving help evaluating apprentices from universities before they are employed would be an advantage for small and micro company employers.

We will have established that they have the aptitude and the skill, the potential to develop their skill and have the motivation to succeed. Something that gives us a sense of security that that first process has been achieved. Which you don't do if you just post an ad, you know you have to figure that out for yourself, which is hugely time consuming for a small company like ours (G).

While this model is not currently an option through the Institute for Apprenticeships, several companies have already developed informal relationships with universities whereby the creative team sets briefs for students. Working on projects directly not only gives the employer the opportunity to identify the most talented and skilled student for future employment but also,

the ability to evaluate whether someone is the right kind of personality, because [new employee] could be technically very competent and very keen, but it's also about [a] professional persona (H).

Opportunities to identify the most suitable candidates for interview, through link-ups with colleges and universities, already forms part of the recruitment process for many small and micro companies. Although this method can be more time consuming than the more traditional recruitment process, businesses see it as time well spent if they are able to develop apprentices from the early 'bottom up' stages.

Recruitment and diversity

Industry professionals believe that creative industry companies need a diverse, broad range of interests and skills to function well and to help develop a broader range of ideas and cultural values. Several participants noted the lack of gender parity, cultural diversity and the narrow socio-economic range of backgrounds in the industry. This is not merely a matter of ethics but professional concern with widening the cultural perspective of the workforce. A director at a 'niche' 'high end' company that produces editing for television commercials remarks,

I'm always trying to find ways to get more diverse range of young people into the company because we mostly take people that have contacted us. They're predominantly male. We're getting really few women applying (A).

Enabling a greater diversity of applicants from a broader range of socio-economic backgrounds is seen as a problem that needs addressing, too:

What's important in our creative industry, and especially in broadcasting, is that [...] we want to reach the widest number of people possible, and you can only do that by having people that come from different walks of life. I don't necessarily mean colour, although that is important. For me, it's about having opportunities for working class kids, like myself, because if you don't have that, you don't have any other perspectives. It's bad enough having very few women in higher positions but couple that with how many working class [men and women] there are around, [there are] really hardly any. So I specifically have gone out of my way to find those people [...] because they bring a completely different perspective (G).

There are already examples of education establishments being formed to address the issue of diversity and socio-economic inequality. The Brixton Finishing School provides a 12-week 'digital 'accelerator' that fills the skills gap between education and work for young people from marginalised backgrounds who will not attend university. Its aim is to 'disrupt how creative industries recruit' (2020) and deliver 'work ready' talent to the media industry.

Training

Interviewees consider the creative industries as being historically poor at providing adequate investment in staff training and retention within the sector. Two interviewees were ex-BBC and found that, currently, the equivalent standard of training was difficult to find. Some indicated that they would like to 'give something back'.

I've benefitted from fantastic training [but] that formal training does not exist in our industry anymore. So we really want to invest in more people. So it would be really important for us. We are [going to] explore the possibilities of DAs (H).

One of the pitfalls small and micro businesses face when considering adopting DAs is the training commitment necessary to complete the programme effectively. Four of the interviewees responded that training apprentices in a small business is seen as too time-consuming, particularly when everyone's time and work commitment is already crucial in the sequence of their work. Due to the small number of employees, staff are more inclined to be masters of their craft within a niche industry setting. They are 'time-poor' and have little schedule for mentoring:

We're a small company. Everyone has a task and if they don't perform that then that screws up someone else down the line in the process of production. [We don't] have enough time, or a dedicated person who could be a mentor/go to person/tutor within the workplace. Now that's a big ask for anyone on my team (H).

However, the issues of mentorship and tutoring, outlined above, may be addressed before the apprenticeship commences training in the workplace, through consultation with the educational provider.

Additionally, one of the main considerations around recruitment for small businesses is managing the risks involved:

The effort and time that goes into training people is a disproportionately large amount of your collective time. [...] So for us it's really a case of satisfying ourselves that some of those risks can be managed carefully and that there's a strong chance at the end that it will be successful (D).

Some interviewees were also apprehensive about apprentices leaving part way through the programme. Small companies were concerned that they would not be able to provide the breadth of experience necessary for a DA. Two interviewees said that they would 'feel bad' asking apprentices to do menial or boring tasks and how this might impact on the degree assessment criteria.

Partnership or collaboration with a university

At the end of each interview respondents were asked whether, in the event that DAs were not viable for their company, what partnership or collaboration with a university would work? Over half of

participants suggested a *quid pro quo* partnership, where their company could provide projects and insights into work, in exchange for identifying suitable talent for employment. Indeed, this is a type of recruitment that is already proving successful with one interviewee's company that has built an "informal arrangement" with a university, where students are given live briefs. The approach of the student and their solution to the brief enables the company to assess their suitability for employment:

They come and work in our office on those briefs either within or outside their term time, sort of a mini step towards an apprenticeship without it being an actual apprenticeship. [...] We try and have a relationship with the student beforehand in the sense of going to see their work and look at their portfolios. [...] So we've dipped our toe unwittingly into that sort of relationship building (C).

From there, the company employs suitable candidates as trainees to work in the company and train them on the job. In this sense, the university has acted as a vetting system, albeit one that provides students with a degree at the end. However, in this example, the qualification is not the important part of the recruitment process. Indeed, a non-formalised unstructured training process that utilises university students exists in many of the companies that were interviewed:

We've already had some very successful partnerships with several students over the six years we've been running. [...] We've taken students in their second year on an ad hoc, unstructured basis, working and assisting on projects in our cutting room in east London. [A degree apprenticeship] is a slightly more structured way. [For us] it's about understanding, navigating the Government's [guidelines and regulations] (H).

Finally, one interviewee believed that there was a need to explain how labour within a creative environment proceeds:

Getting people from our company in to talk at universities more often about the reality of what the industry's like and what we're doing (A).

Indicating the need for greater collaboration and communication between Universities and employers.

Analysis and Evaluation

Initially, the predominant issue emanating from interviewees was of a lack of awareness of DAs. However, when presented with the DA model, respondents could see the value of a degree linked to such a programme. Firstly, a degree would act as an incentive in the application and recruitment process and, secondly, might help to attract a suitable type of applicant. Thirdly, many companies already have some experience of informal training within their company and considered that developing a formal degree apprenticeship standard (or using an existing one) would increase the quality and expansion of their current 'in-house' training and help fund and grow this activity.

Indeed, a new model for recruitment and training is considered necessary due to the niche and specialised nature in which these small and micro creative businesses operate; one which provides greater control over the development of knowledge, skills and behaviours which they consider are often lacking when recruiting graduates.

While initially participants were supportive of DAs, one of the areas deemed in need of improvement is the lack of off-the-shelf approved standards with the creative sectors and the process of developing standards through a Trailblazer group were seen as major issues.

The term ‘niche’ has been used several times by participants to identify the small and micro businesses they work. One of the main areas of concern throughout the data gathering process and on subsequent visits and communication with employers was the provisions and rules requiring a minimum of ten companies to form Trailblazer group.

A potential solution to this issue could be to develop links with creative industries trade organisations. These organisations often enjoy large membership numbers with access to and communication with small and micro companies. Often there is a cluster of niche companies already in communication. Developing partnerships with trade associations would be beneficial not only in the identification of synergistic companies who could work together, but also in the development of the standard as part of the Trailblazer group. However, the introduction of a more flexible development path for standards, particularly one that takes into consideration the limitations of small and micro companies, would help resolve this issue.

Another area where participants gave broad support was through the development of employer-led apprenticeship standards. However, several interviewees suggested that, due to the size and resources of their companies, they would welcome support from training providers and universities to initiate and develop apprenticeship standards. While the IfA’s ‘fast and better’ (2019) initiative aims is to speed-up the development process, this is a time-consuming and potentially costly process for small and micro creative industries employers, especially when considering the investment in human resources needed to progress the standard. Although the procurement process to find the appropriate learning provider is not initiated until after the standard has been approved, this has a potential benefit to the training provider/university. Working in a collaborative process, as part of the Trailblazer group, would build confidence and trust. The actively involved training provider/university, therefore, would be in an advantageous position to meet and understand employers’ needs.

One topic of concern for creative industry business owners was the need for small and micro companies to grow but the lack of training available or provided by the industry. All companies participating in this research expressed a need for growing their business, but the process of selecting new workers can be costly, both financially and professionally, particularly if they make the wrong recruitment choice. Small and micro businesses have limited resources and most work at capacity with little time for training and recruitment. Added to this, the transient nature of work in creative sectors

and the high proportion of freelance work (Creative Industries Federation, 2017) can be problematic for the sustainability of employing an apprentice.

Lack of diversity in creative industries recruitment is an added issue which “does not reflect the diversity of the UK” (Carey H. et al., 2017:i), and traditional recruitment processes have failed to address. A diverse workforce is seen as beneficial for innovation (Nathan and Lee, 2013). Several interviewees commented that the degree apprenticeships might help creative industries benefit from greater gender and socio-economic diversity. DAs have a good record in this area increasing social mobility and helping provide opportunities to non-traditional students (Universities UK, 2016:1). Additionally research from Social Mobility Commission into Further Education (FE) and Apprenticeships shows that “apprenticeships have the potential be a powerful vehicle for social mobility” (2019:59). Research into CAs indicates that they are key drivers for diversity with employers. CAs can “support employers seeking to attract employees from diverse backgrounds who might not otherwise have been able to break in to the sector (principally those who are not inclined towards academic qualifications)” (Creative Culture and Skills, 2011:17). Future research practice in this area at HE level has the potential to shape government policy.

Several employers indicated that a three-year commitment to a DA might be too long and challenging for small and micro companies. This is understandable given the constraints of their size and the highly competitive, commercial environment they operate. In this situation employers might feel more at ease developing a one-year level 6 standard where a degree achieved. This could be addressed through collaboration and recruitment from a FE college where students at the end of the second-year foundation degree could transfer to the university to complete the final year of a level-6 degree apprenticeship. Indeed, there are many similarities and parallels of provision between FE and HE sectors with regards to DAs, which have significance for their success. As previously cited, in recent years research has been conducted into CAs in the FE sector and concentrated on the impact for employers and employment (Creative Culture and Skills, 2011). An innovative area of development is the “concept of ‘freelance CAs’ employed by providers but hired out to several SME employers [which] appears to be attractive to smaller businesses that [...] lack the ability to support a Creative Apprenticeship on their own” (ibid.:11). Therefore, CA research can provide a rich source of insight and value to provider-employer relationship and how DAs are developed and deployed.

Conclusion

The creative industries continue to grow rapidly. They subsist in sectors made up of predominantly small, niche companies, often operating at full capacity with little time to spend on training and business development. Results from this research indicate that many small companies have difficulty recruiting the most suitable candidates for their job roles. This is particularly applicable when employing juniors, runners, interns and graduates, due to the lack of evidence of applicants’ ability and behavioural suitability for their company. Often company owners look to hire experienced

creative people with proven track records and/or a high-level portfolio of creative work over training up juniors or graduates. However, company owners identify a need to develop their company from the bottom up and see DAs as one of the ways of growing their business.

From the company interviews conducted for this study, many positive aspects of DAs were expressed. Significantly, while participants suggested that a university degree is not essential when recruiting, companies consider the degree element of apprenticeships appealing both from an employer and apprentice perspective. From the non-levy paying employer's viewpoint, the apprenticeship training subsidy from the levy fund is highly attractive. They also see the incentive it provides for the applicant in the recruitment process, in that the apprentices are working towards a degree while in paid work and without student tuition fee debt. In addition, company owners are able to design the skills, knowledge and behaviours appropriate for their company alongside building loyalty through offering workers something other than a salary.

In light of this, there is some urgency for university art, design and media courses to develop provision that goes beyond the traditional three-year campus-based degree course. DAs offer the opportunity for universities to establish new and long-lasting relationships with employers and a way for universities to diversify their offer (Universities UK, 2016).

As DAs become more prevalent in the higher education sector, providing new pathways for curriculum development and learning outcomes through industry partnerships is vital. In this evolving environment universities need to think rigorously about how they engage and communicate with industry. Elizabeth Miller, business management degrees programme leader at Pearson College argues this point:

Universities will need to think structurally about how apprentices fit in with their traditional students and how staff, academic and administrative, will need to rethink their roles to best support this new type of learner and to engage meaningfully with their employers. [...] Many universities will need to think more rigorously about how they engage with industry. While the majority will have already developed links with employers, if the degree apprenticeship is to be incorporated into the university offer, as I expect it to be, they will need to involve employers in the development of the courses (Miller, 2018).

An added concern is the recent decline in student university admissions (Weale, 2018). Statistics indicate a short-term demographic downturn of 14% in young people of university age between 2010 and the early 2020s (HEFCE, 2015:16). However, other factors might also account for the downturn in enrolment for art, design and media courses.

Indeed, historically, having a university degree has not necessarily been a mandatory requirement for gaining a job in the creative industries. For many creative industries employers, a good portfolio of creative work, work experience and an understanding of the requirements of the job have higher cachet than a formal qualification.

While many creative recruitment agencies and HR departments still require a 'degree or equivalent' when applying for a job, creative industries employers, as this research reveals, are increasingly shifting towards the need for more vocational on-the-job and in-work training to address the skills shortages within these sectors. Additionally, the rise of non-qualification-awarding institutions of learning, such as the School of Communication Arts and the Brixton Finishing School, indicates a significance of traditional degrees in favour of work-placements and industry experience. If this trend continues, it will be a concern for conventional art, design and media graduate university courses throughout the UK, where the degree qualification are an integral part of their *modus operandi*.

In addition, an Institute for Fiscal Studies report (Britton J. et al., 2020) claims that creative arts higher education courses offer negative financial returns on investment where 20% earn less than those with similar school results and who did not attend university. While the Augur review acknowledges the value of quality education for the creative industries, it also includes recommendations to cut funding for some arts and humanities degrees based on graduate earnings and shift in funding towards further education (FE) and vocational training (Augar, 2019).

Therefore, if these recommendations are adopted and the trend continues, DAs are set to become a more attractive option for people wishing to pursue a career in creative industries. DAs have the potential to be crucial in the future of creative-industry orientated higher education courses and add to the mix of options available to young people and, indeed, up-skilling current employees. They also offer young people another option to tuition fee loan debt and ever-increasing living costs associated with attending a traditional three-year degree. DAs also offer the opportunities for marginalised young people to enter the creative industries and encourage a more diverse cultural mix.

To make this happen action is needed to ensure that a broad range of apprenticeship standards are developed for the creative industries and associated digital skills so that these sectors can benefit fully from the opportunities available. In addition, greater ease of access to the Apprenticeship Levy Fund is necessary to scale-up adoption of DAs particularly for small and micro, non-levy paying creative industry companies that make up the vast majority of companies in the creative industries. Therefore, independent access to ESFA funding for non-levy paying employers is crucial to enable easier access to 95% the cost of apprenticeship training from the Apprenticeship Levy fund (Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2019).

As respondents from creative industry companies have indicated, having a degree is not necessarily recognition of capability, especially with regards to behaviours. However, through DAs, blending technical and academic education addresses both the creative development and analytical thinking that is embedded alongside the on-the-job experience and training. The apprentice is able to develop a portfolio, showreel or skill to industry-standard and the knowledge, learning and behaviours that demonstrate an ability to work with both clients and alongside other professional people in the field.

Consequently, the degree element of the apprenticeship needs to be promoted as an integral part of the training programme, which provides a formal framework to which both apprentices and employers can

adhere. In the workplace, apprentices are able to respond and adapt immediately to changes in the industry, be that necessitated through a change in working practices or as a result of how technology is used, developed, implemented, shaped and modified.

Appendix

Anonymised participant index

A – Head of Organisation and Development at a TV commercials and editing company

B – Creative Director and Director at a production agency for moving image

C – Co-founder and Head of Creative at a direction, design, digital, broadcast and motion graphics company

D – Company Director at a video marketing company

E – Director of a digital agency for non-profits

F – Chief Technology Officer at a digital design and marketing company

G – Founding Partner and Creative Director at a creative video and animation company

H – Producer at an editing, motion graphics and VFX company

I – Company Director at a video, animation, branding and film company

J – Director of a media partnership & independent writer, editor, blogger, website designer

K – Founder of a training provider for 19+ across a wide range of sectors

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